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The mediating role of relative communicative behavior on the relationship between ethical leadership and organizational identification

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to examine the underlying process of a relative leader–member dyadic communication behavior linking association between ethical leadership and organizational identification in Malaysia's diverse workplace.

Design/methodology/approach – Based on relational dyadic communication, social comparison and social identity theories, the authors develop a mediation model. The model illustrates the link between the relative leader–member dyadic communication behavior processes, ethical leadership and organizational identification. The model was tested on a sample of 273 group members from 58 groups working in large government link corporations in Malaysia.

Findings – Results of hierarchical regression analysis provide support for the model. The authors found that ethical leadership was positively related to relative leader–member dyadic communication behavior based on the norms and values of *budi* context. *Budi* is a social norm in the Malaysian context that helps employees to know how they should interact with others. *Budi* is manifested through the use of language and should be used or present in the interactions or conversations with others.

Originality/value – The relative shared norms and values of *budi* mediate the relationship between ethical leadership and organizational identification after controlling for the perception of individual leader–member dyadic communication behavior on norms and values of *budi*.

Keywords Group, Ethical leadership, Multilevel, Leader–member, Organizational identification

Paper type Research paper

Besides peripheral mentions, ethical leadership studies have largely overlooked the foundational role of communication in enacting this particular leadership style and articulating how leader communication shapes related group members' behavioral expectations. One such area that has yet to be explored is how leader–member communicative exchanges can directly or indirectly influence member attitudes and behavior at the group level (Demirtas and Akdogan, 2015; Schaubroeck *et al.*, 2012; Neubert *et al.*, 2013; Bedi *et al.*, 2016). In this respect, a group of leadership scholars (see Bakar and Omilion-Hodges, 2018; Omilion-Hodges and Baker, 2017; Walumbwa *et al.*, 2017;

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Schaubroeck *et al.*, 2012) has asserted that the interpersonal exchange relationships between leader–member dyads and coworkers are interconnected and embedded within a larger social network in organizations. This suggests that these exchange relationships are interdependent and can and often do influence each other (Sias and Jablin, 1995). In other words, employees' perceptions of the communication relationships of their leader with each member create an environment conducive to interpersonal comparison that may lead each employee to be aware of her/his relative standing in workgroup. Thus, a group member's perception of his/her relative standing in the workgroup is likely to be formed in large part by how he/she views his/her unique leader–member relationship in contrast to the leader–member relationships experienced by his/her peers. Moreover, since employees endeavor to develop closer relationships with their leader than their average workgroup colleague, perceptions of their individual leader–member relationship may also influence their work attitudes and behaviors toward the organization. In this case, the term "relative" is defined as a group member's perception of leader–member communication relative to the average perception of leader–member communication of others within a workgroup (i.e. Vidyarthi *et al.*, 2010).

Although social comparison in groups is natural, the challenge lies in the fact that leaders tend to only develop high-quality relationships with a handful of followers (Omilion-Hodges and Baker, 2013). However, these high-quality leader–member relationships serve as channels for leaders to distribute organizational resources in the form of job benefits and psychological support to followers (Graen *et al.*, 1982; Omilion-Hodges and Baker, 2017). From this perspective, group members in high-quality relationships are likely to be more advantaged relative to other group members, where employees with high-quality leader–member relationships are also more likely to befriend other in-group members (Sherony and Green, 2002; Vidyarthi *et al.*, 2010). Taken together, this suggests that an employee's communicative exchange with his/her leader is likely to reflect his/her comparative position in the workgroup (see Sias, 2005) where members tend to be motivated to work hard to achieve a trusted relationship with their leader (i.e. Martin *et al.*, 2018; Vidyarthi *et al.*, 2010). Consequently, the differences between a group member's communicative exchange with his/her group leader and others within the workgroup may influence his/her perception of the leader's ethical leadership behavior. Put simply, the communicative relationship shared in any given leader–member dyad can be described on a continuum from low to high shared meaning (see Bakar and McCann, 2016). Leader–member dyads that have evolved into trusted partnerships will be viewed and interpreted differently by members than leader–member dyads that are more transactional in nature. Moreover, the communication that typifies each leader–member dyad is observable – that is, others in the workgroup can watch how the leader and the member address one another, how they seek and take counsel, or how praise is given (or withheld) and form accurate perceptions of the relationship (Omilion-Hodges and Baker, 2013). Thus, since research indicates that employees are savvy discerners of managerial behavior (Omilion-Hodges and Baker, 2013, 2017; Sias and Jablin, 1995), it is important to consider how varied leader–member relationships impact the collective functioning of the workgroup. Although the theoretical and practical implications of relational differences within workgroup dyads and between dyads have been made explicit, research examining the effect of relative leader–member dyadic communication behavior based on the cultural context and the underlying communicative process involved has only recently begun to attract scholars (Boies *et al.*, 2015; Bonaccio *et al.*, 2016).

As a concrete means to nuance the underlying communicative processes through which varied leader–member exchange relationships emerge and impact employee behaviors and workgroup functioning, we explore the underlying process of a relative leader–member dyadic communication model. We use social identity and social comparison theories to delve into the potential linking function of relative leader–member dyadic communication

behavior between ethical leadership and organizational identification. More simply stated, we theorize that in workgroups where members perceive their leader to be ethical, employees will naturally seek to establish high-quality relationships with their leader, thereby elevating the overall leader–member relationship quality within the group. Relatedly, when a leader is seen as ethical, the depth of communicative cultural norms exchanged between members and their leader is likely to spark joint achievement of workgroup goals while simultaneously serving as a crucial factor in the development and maintenance of robust workgroup relationships. In turn, by working together to achieve organizational goals, leader–member relationships – especially when cultivated with an ethical leader – are suspected to foster employee identification with the organization (see Figure 1 for proposed model).

We aim to advance leader–member dyadic communication literature in two important ways. First, we examine the effect of ethical leadership on relative leader–member dyadic communication behavior. This extends current ethical leadership by highlighting the pivotal role of communication in the social comparison process that members undergo to assess their leader's ethical behavior and the way they identify with the organization as a whole. Specifically, we argue that by exploring individual members' leader–member communication relationships relative to the average perception of leader–member communication of others within a workgroup, we address a new and critically important issue about the implication of the social context of the workgroup, that is, social comparison is likely to provide a new perspective on whether ethical leadership is associated with leader–member dyadic communication behavior and, in turn, may help to explain group members' cognitive, affective and motivational processes. Second, this line of investigation represents a direct response to scholars such as Huang and Paterson (2017) and Mo and Shi (2017) who called to identify the underlying mechanisms and process variables that link ethical leadership traits and behavior with tangible outcomes of such identification. Furthermore, Seibold *et al.* (2014) also called to identify the underlying communication process variables linking group traits and employee behavior. Drawing on the relational dyadic communication model, social identity theory (SIT) and social comparison theory (SCT), we propose that relative leader–member dyadic communication behavior mediates the relationship between ethical leadership and organizational identification. In particular, we posit that relative leader–member dyadic communication behavior has the potential to increase our understanding of how ethical leadership is related to the way group members perceive and envision their role and contribution in a workgroup (Demirtas and Akdogan, 2015). Finally, this research is conducted in the vastly understudied area of ethical leadership in Malaysia, and it extends and broadens the literature in the domains of ethical leadership, employee communication and organizational behavior. Intact workgroups from Malaysia were selected for study because they operate in a unique multi-ethnic configuration. In fact, Malaysian culture is firmly grounded in visible ethnic identity and in

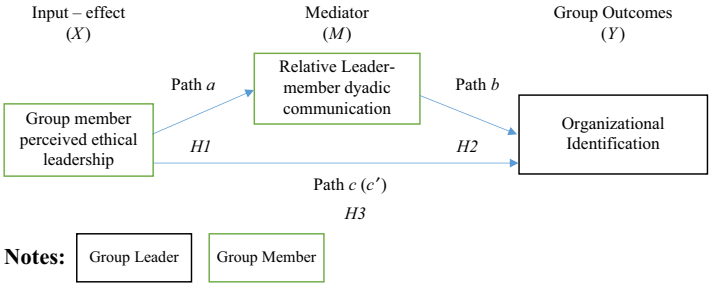

Figure 1.
Hypothesized model of relative leader–member dyadic communication linking ethical leadership to organizational identification

building relationships (Bakar and McCann, 2016). This presents an opportunity to further consider leader–member relationships in a context where unique cultures and diverse ethnic makeups are salient workgroup features.

Theoretical background and hypotheses development

Ethical leadership: conceptualization and empirical evidence

Ethical leadership can be defined as "the demonstration of normatively appropriate conduct through personal actions and interpersonal relationships, and the promotion of such conduct to followers through two-way communication, reinforcement, and decision-making" (Brown *et al.,* 2005, p. 120). Brown and Treviño (2006) pointed out that ethical leadership not only emphasizes the moral aspect of leadership, but it also encourages positive behavior in followers. These behaviors include explicitly discussing ethical behaviors with followers and pairing appropriate rewards with ethical behavior and relatedly, fitting punishments with unethical behavior (Brown and Treviño, 2006). These findings suggest that ethical leadership focuses on the impact of leader–member relationships that are situated within the wider social context of the organization and more specifically within intact workgroups.

Despite the fact that extant ethical leadership literature reiterates group-level outcomes, to date, most ethical leadership research gauges only one party's perspective, and therefore fails to account for and capture the impact of a contextualized leader–member dyad within a workgroup (see Ng and Feldman, 2015). This is reminiscent of early leader–member exchange (LMX) research that has been criticized for assessing the strength and various outcomes of the dyadic relationship from the perspective of either the leader or the member (Graen and Uhl-Bien, 1995; Friedrich *et al.,* 2016), while failing to address the context in which the dyads are situated. Empirical studies have demonstrated the usefulness of the ethical leadership construct for explaining member behaviors. For example, studies have found that follower perceptions of ethical leadership are positively related to follower perceptions of leader interactional fairness (Xu *et al.*, 2016), follower ethical behavior (Steinbauer *et al.*, 2014) and follower voice behavior (Chen and Hou, 2016). This reiterates the foundational role of communication in ethical leadership, that is, when employees feel that decisions have been communicated clearly and their manager interacts with each follower equitably, employees tend to see their leader as an ethical actor. Thus, leaders do not necessarily have to exchange with each employee equally, but rather fairly based on member contribution. Furthermore, ethical leadership also relates to and is different from other leadership styles such as transformational, servant and transactional leadership (Hoch *et al.*, 2018). These findings demonstrate that ethical leadership is a unique construct that is conceptually related to specific follower outcomes. We therefore expect that ethical leadership can explain meaningful variance not only in leader–member dyadic communication behavior, but also in group members' organizational identification.

Relative leader–member dyadic communication behavior in the malaysian context

Malaysian workplace dynamics are quite unique with the uneven ethnic distribution of workers across economic sectors (see Bakar and McCann, 2016). Bakar *et al.* (2014) uncovered that one-way employees are able to interact across the ethnic divides through the *budi* context in Malaysian workplace, that is, the way in which an individual communicates emotions, feelings and thoughts, as well as manifests kindness is known as *budi bicara*. This particular communication behavior in the workplace manifests in the unique dyadic communication relationship between a leader and each individual workgroup member. For example, a person with a high level of *budi*, when communicating and interacting with another person, should be thoughtful and considerate, engage in socially appropriate conduct and be enlightened and practical. In fact, *budi* is reflected throughout the entire

spectrum of mind, emotion, morality, goodness and practicality in judgments of the communication and interaction with another person. The aggregate of the individual leader–member dyadic relationships culminates in the collective achievement of workgroup goals and serves as a crucial factor in the social relationship development and maintenance of the workgroup. Thus, we argue that leader–member dyadic communication behavior based on the cultural norm of *budi bicara* can be viewed as a manifestation of the socially and culturally appropriate interactive exchanges that occur between leaders and members. Thus, in the current study, leader–member dyadic communication behavior refers to the extent to which a group member expresses his/her emotions, feelings and thoughts and manifests kindness in his/her evaluations of interactions or conversations with his/her group leader. This construct is related to group members' organizational citizenship behavior (OCB) (Bakar and McCann, 2016) and group performance (Bakar and McCann, 2018) relative to other members within the workgroup.

Relative leader–member relationships derive from the work of Graen *et al.* (1982), which is based on the social exchange that occurs in leader–member relationships. The term "relative" refers to a group member's standing in terms of the quality of their exchange relationship with the group leader. Thus, expanding this to the notion of leader–member dyadic communication behavior, the term relative leader–member dyadic communication behavior can be referred to as a group member's relative standing in term of the quality of his/her exchanges with his/her group leader. Therefore, relative leader–member dyadic communication behavior reflects the degree to which a group member's leader–member dyadic communication differs from the average leader–member dyadic communication of workgroup peers. In terms of empirical findings, leader–member communication behavior is associated with important work outcomes beyond the effects of LMX. For example, Jian and Dalisay (2017) found that leader–member conversation effects on organizational commitment is greater than LMX alone. Thus, we can expect that relative leader–member dyadic communication behavior is a unique construct and can explain meaningful variance in group members' behavior above and beyond the members' individual perceptions of their leader's prevailing approach to management – such as ethical leadership.

Relational dyadic communication, social comparison and social identity theories

In developing the hypothesized relationships in our model, we utilize three theories: relational dyadic communication (Barry and Crant, 2000), SCT (Festinger, 1954) and SIT (Tajfel and Turner, 1986).

Relational dyadic communication model postulates that dyadic communication is at the heart of all workplace relational dynamics. The relational dyadic communication model assumes that within a dyad, communication is characterized by meaning that can be conveyed with few words, interactional movements are highly synchronized and members of the dyad are able to accurately interpret intended meanings (Barry and Crant, 2000). The culmination of the exchanges that occur between a leader and a member impacts the quality of the leader–member relationship, and within workgroups, we would expect that communication exchanges vary between leader–member dyads (see Bakar and Sheer, 2013).

SCT assumes that individuals tend to self-evaluate and learn about themselves by comparing with others based on attributes, abilities and performance. Festinger (1954) noted that the social comparison process happens when individuals lack an objective means to understand their own place in a social context. Thus, working in a group provides individual employees with opportunities for social comparison because their peers share common attributes such as reporting to the same group leader, working in a similar position and undergoing similar work experiences (i.e. meetings, performance evaluations). Furthermore, workgroup members are often required to interact with each other to achieve group goals. Research has also demonstrated that self-evaluation derived from

social comparison serves as a foundation for motivational processes that can predict individuals' work attitudes and communication behaviors (Berger and Calabrese, 1974).

SIT asserts that individuals are driven to see themselves positively (personal identity) and to secure membership within groups (social identity) (Tajfel, 1982). According to Tajfel and Turner (1986), a person's social identity is comprised of his/her personal identity (such as their individual attributes, abilities and past experience) and his/her social identity (such as group attributes, processes and composition). Hogg and Terry (2000) warned that both personal and social identities are important in organizational settings because they influence individuals' self-concept within a workgroup.

Both SCT and SIT theories imply that individuals are constantly exposed to various situations of self-evaluation. However, one concrete way that organizational members can sustain their self-concept in the social context of a workgroup is through the relationship they share with their leader. The quality of their leader–member relationship, especially in contrast to the average quality relationship the leader maintains across dyads, influences members' work attitudes and behavior. Thus, in the workgroup context, the above theories suggest that group members are aware of the group leader's ethical leadership style and quality of coworkers' communication quality with their group leader (Sias and Jablin, 1995; Sias, 2005). Therefore, it is observed that SCT and SIT interact to form a member's judgment about his/her leader's ethical behavior and also form a judgement about his/her leader–member dyadic communication relative to other leader–member dyads within the group. Simply stated, a group member's relative leader–member dyadic communication (higher or lower than average leader–member dyadic communication in the workgroup) is likely to affect how he/she perceives himself or herself in the workgroup.

Ethical leadership, organizational identification and relative leader–member dyadic communication behavior

Empirical studies have demonstrated the impact of ethical leadership on specific member behaviors. For example, studies have found that follower perceptions of ethical leadership are positively related to follower's turnover intentions, affective commitment and perceptions of an ethical workplace climate (see Demirtas and Akdogan, 2015). One of the central effects of ethical leadership is that leaders provide followers opportunities to communicate and to express their views (Brown *et al.*, 2005), where members are encouraged to publicly oppose inappropriate or ineffective organizational behavior and actions, and instead offer feasible alternatives. This stems from the fact that an ethical group leader will cultivate an environment that encourages group members to exchange their own ideas and opinions while also providing channels and processes for improving work procedures and environments (Demirtas, 2015). Considering this, it is surprising that previous studies on ethical leadership largely detach from leader–member communication activities, even though these communicative interactions are beneficial in the workgroup and for the success of organizations (e.g. Frazier and Bowler, 2015; Bashshur and Oc, 2015). Moreover, it is through the leader's verbal and noverbal communicative actions that ethical leadership is modeled and, in turn, observed by members.

Leader–member dyadic communication presents opportunities to improve situations in the workgroup or in the organization (Van Dyne and LePine, 1998). From this perspective, it can be observed that leader–member relations are powerful communicative tools, which can be harnessed to improve work-related outcomes and social communicative exchanges within the group. These communication exchanges can enable group members to express their viewpoints with the leader while also influencing the group or organizational climate (Lee *et al.*, 2014; Frazier and Bowler, 2015; Bashshur and Oc, 2015). When group members perceive that a group leader conveys high moral standards, an environment is created where members are encouraged to express opinions and suggestions for workgroup

improvement (Walumbwa *et al.*, 2017). In this way, ethical leader behavior facilitates communicative behaviors that hold the leader and followers jointly responsible for fostering an ever-evolving learning environment. In turn, research indicates that because of the shared leader and member responsibility and involvement, members are likely to make fewer mistakes and routine work and efficiency are enhanced (Aryee *et al.*, 2017; Venkataramani *et al.*, 2016).

Whereas positive perceptions of a leader's behavior may spark positive employee outcomes, low-quality exchange-based leader–member relationships can actually deter the degree of communicative behavior between the dyad (Omilion-Hodges and Baker, 2017). Through a series of focus groups, Omilion-Hodges and Baker (2017) found that employees frequently engage in conversation to make sense of their leader's behaviors and decisions, indicating that leader–member dyadic communication behaviors are interpreted relative to the collective variance of individual leader–member relationships (Fairhurst and Uhl-Bien, 2012). In other words, when employees perceive large distinctions in the communication activities they share with their leader in contrast to the other dyadic leader–member relationships within the workgroup, the communication between and among workgroup members is likely to be negatively impacted. Moreover, scores of literatures regarding leader–member relationships have found that employees who share relationships of a similar quality (whether high, moderate or low) tend to befriend one another and distance themselves from workgroup peers who they perceive to have a stronger or weaker relationship with the manager (Sherony and Green, 2002; Sias, 2005). This suggests that in groups with a large variance in the quality of individual leader–member dyadic communication, there are likely to be large variances in coworker and team associations. This, in turn, can lead to distancing and avoidance behaviors in addition to withholding information (Omilion-Hodges and Baker, 2017). These perceptions then influence interpersonal communication, which functions to reinforce perceptions of workgroup relationships (Bakar and Sheer, 2013; Bakar and McCann, 2016), indicating that individual leader–member dyadic communication is also related to the average leader–member communication within the group.

In summary, group members make sense of their behavior, their leader's behavior and other group members' behavior in the workgroup. If they feel that they are treated fairly based on their individual contributions, they are likely to exchange freely with not only their group leader, but also with their peers of a similar ilk. However, if they feel that they or others are not compensated equitably based on output, group members may engage in less prosocial group behaviors and instead withhold contributions and minimize interpersonal interactions in the workgroup. This suggests that group leaders who value the collective functioning of their workgroups should be intentional with their communication in order to ensure that group members understand the values and beliefs guiding that particular leader. Moreover, when leaders engage in ethical leadership including being mindful of the perceptions of each individual leader–member relationship, they create an environment that encourages overall positive communication within the workgroup. Therefore, we propose the following hypothesis:

H1a. Ethical leadership is positively related to organizational identification.

H1b. Ethical leadership is positively related to relative leader–member dyadic communication behavior.

Relative leader–member dyadic communication behavior and organizational identification

The idea that effective leadership stimulates positive follower outcomes is well supported (see Hoch *et al.*, 2018). Furthermore, given its conceptual similarity to other positive leadership constructs (i.e. LMX, transformational), which are positively associated with commitment,

OCB, job satisfaction and organizational identification, we would expect that ethical leadership rated by leader and follower would likely have a similar positive relationship with organizational identification. As mentioned earlier, previous studies have documented that employees are aware of the quality of their relationship (Hu and Liden, 2013) via the quality of their communicative exchanges (Omilion-Hodges and Baker, 2017) with their group leader. These unique leader–member relationships allow employees to form judgements of group members' relative relationships and communication quality in the workgroup. Relatedly, relative leader–member dyadic communication behavior refers to the actual degree to which an individual's leader–member dyadic communication behavior differs from the average leader–member dyadic communication behavior in the workgroup. This also suggests that relative leader–member dyadic communication behavior can be regarded as reflective of the actual position of each employee in reference to the differentiated leader–member relationships within the workgroup. Therefore, we can expect that high and low relative leader–member dyadic communication behavior represents objective information that provides employees with a point of reference to understand their position relative to other group members (Hu and Liden, 2013). In this regard, in groups where the majority of leader–member dyads share high-quality relationships, we expect that communication with the group leader is likely to be highly synchronized, and members can convey intended meaning with few words (Barry and Crant, 2000). In such a scenario, it is likely that group members may experience feelings of superiority and respect because their leader–member dyadic communication behavior is relatively higher than their counterparts within the workgroup. These feelings of positive self-regard may also stem from members' increased access to benefits and resources in contrast to others in the workgroup (Marler and Stanley, 2018; Mesmer-Magnus *et al.*, 2018; Nason *et al.*, 2018). SIT also indicates that "a relatively enduring state that reflects an individual's readiness to define him or herself as a member of a particular social group" (Haslam, 2001, p. 383). Thus, Blader and Tyler (2009) noted that individuals tend to make two basic status evaluations with regard to their workplaces. The first evaluation is in regard to organizational status and the second deals with employees' assessment of their individual status in the organization. Therefore, if a group member sees himself/herself as sharing a more communicative leader–member relationship than his/her peers, he/she will likely contribute more than counterparts who view themselves as low status members or members who foster beliefs that diverge from the leader and or group. Members who are seen as having high-quality leader–member dyadic communication are likely to be perceived as having the leader's trust, which can promote and raise identification (sense of oneness and belonging) with the workgroup or organization because such interpersonal treatment conveys to individuals that they are valued and respected (see Demirtas *et al.*, 2017). Therefore, the following hypothesis is postulated:

H2. Relative leader–member dyadic communication behavior is positively related to organizational identification (after controlling for individual perceptions of leader–member dyadic communication behavior).

Relative leader–member dyadic communication behavior as a mediator

Ethical leaders build quality relationships with employees that go beyond specified economic agreements and social norms of reciprocity (Brown and Treviño, 2014). An ethical leader values honest and trusting relationships with his/her followers (Brown *et al.*, 2005). Within his/her workgroup, an ethical leader is seen by his/her followers as a principled decision maker who cares not only for employees' well-being, but also for the organization and society (Brown *et al.*, 2005). Additionally, these leaders act according to their ethical work values and beliefs. Therefore, when group leaders enact ethical values, members of the workgroup are likely to perceive openness and truthfulness in the group communication

climate. Based on SIT and driven by SCT, group members engage in trusted, two-way high-quality communication with their leader and are likely to enjoy a leader–member relationship that differs from the average in the workgroup. Thus, it is likely that these group members who view their leaders as inherently ethical actors are invested more and are more active in the continued success of their group and their organization. Therefore, high relative leader–member communication behavior group members are likely to feel comfortable communicating ideas on work-related issues, as well as ethical issues concerning the group. This type of communication behavior in the group is associated with feelings of identification in the workgroup (Hewlin *et al.*, 2017). Additionally, group members' perceptions of leader–member communication behavior can generate feelings of personal affinity with their leader when there is a perceived alignment between their values and those expressed in the workplace (Lee *et al.*, 2017). When high relative group members express their opinions within groups managed by an ethical leader, they are likely to experience positive feelings from authentically speaking out and acting with their beliefs and values of the group leaders. Hewlin *et al.* (2017) also found that when variance occurs between leader and follower relationships in the workgroup, group members are likely to feel disenchantment and related negative emotional reactions to the group and the organization. Therefore, when group members perceive that their leader–member dyadic communication behavior differs from the average in the workgroup, they may experience a negative self-concept and their individual schemas may be activated to decrease their identification with other group members (LePine *et al.*, 2002). Therefore, we theorize that relative leader–member dyadic communication behavior is a proximal outcome through which ethical leadership style is associated with organizational identification. Therefore, the third hypothesis is presented as follows:

H3. Relative leader–member dyadic communication behavior mediates the relationship between ethical leadership and organizational identification.

Method

Sample and procedure

Participants were employees and their immediate managers in five government link corporations and government investment link corporations (e.g. utilities, fund investment, property, plantations and petroleum) throughout Malaysia. The differing functions of each industry allowed variations needed for multi-level modeling and analysis. Participants had a range of jobs that included handling customer complaints, design, production, staffing, marketing, sales and security system maintenance. Managers' job responsibilities included junior employee mentoring, performance evaluation, job allocation, employee rotation and delivery of services to customers. Consistent with the minimum period typically needed to develop a mature workplace relationship, our sample excluded managers who had been in the position for less than six months and employees who had been in their workgroup for less than six months (see Graen and Uhl-Bien, 1995). This ensured that both the employees and their mangers were sufficiently familiar with each other and had the time necessary to develop exchange relationships. Survey packets were sent to respondents via the Human Resources Department of the participating organizations. Prior to the survey, we matched supervisor–subordinate dyads based on a complete list of employees supplied by the Human Resources Department of each participating organization. A cover letter outlined the research process, solicited voluntary participation and assured confidentiality. The survey packet contained questionnaires and pre-addressed envelopes for participants to return the completed questionnaires directly.

Of the 5,800 questionnaires sent to employees, 273 were returned, indicating a 4.70 percent response rate. In the employee sample, 52 percent were male and 48 percent female;

50 percent were ethnically Malay (Bumiputra), 45 percent Chinese and 5 percent were identified as Indian. Approximately 35 percent of the participants had worked for the current manager for 3–5 years, 45 percent for 6–8 years and 20 percent for 9–11 years. Of the 1,000 questionnaires distributed to managers, 58 (a 5.8 percent response rate) questionnaires were returned. These 58 managers represented 58 unique workgroups, with each having 3–4 group members. In the manager sample, 56 percent were male and 44 percent female; roughly 20 percent were ethically Malay (Bumiputra), 56 percent Chinese and 24 percent Indian. With respect to organizational tenure, half had been employed in the organization for 6–8 years and the other half for more than eight years. Employees' questionnaires were matched to their managers' with a coding system based on the information supplied by the Human Resources Departments. The final sample of 273 matched leader–member dyadic responses within the 58 represented workgroups. Despite the overall low response rate, the final sample of the study culminated effective average within-group rate of 78 percent of the final 58 workgroups, greater than the 60 percent threshold recommended by Timmerman (2005).

To examine possible sampling bias, we conducted *t*-test analyses to test for any demographic differences between the non-respondents and respondents. Results showed that there were no significant differences between the non-respondents and respondents in terms of their demographic information such as gender ($t = 0.89$, $p > 0.05$), education level ($t = 0.09$, $p > 0.05$), organizational tenure ($t = 1.67$, $p > 0.05$) and their ratings of main study variables including ethical leadership ($t = 0.40$, $p > 0.05$), leader–member dyadic communication behavior ($t = 0.42$, $p > 0.05$) and organizational identification ($t = 0.46$, $p > 0.05$). This suggests that our findings would not be biased by the missing leader or group member data.

Instrumentation

We used a seven-point scale ranging from 1, "strongly disagree," to 7, "strongly agree," throughout the questionnaire. Individual items and factor loadings are available in Table II. All questionnaires were presented in English. We followed the commonly accepted practice of using English language questionnaires in surveys in Malaysia (Bakar and Sheer, 2013; Bakar and McCann, 2016), as Malaysians, particularly those in the business sector, are fluent in English. The group member version of the questionnaire consisted of measures of perceived ethical leadership and leader–member dyadic communication behavior. The group leader version included leader perceptions of group members' organizational identification. Each group leader rated organizational identification with three to four group members (his/her immediate followers). Later in statistical analysis, group leaders' and group members' responses were matched and compared. Both versions of the questionnaire include items on workgroup size, organization size and participant demographic information and work history.

Ethical leadership. We measured group members' ethical leadership perception using Brown *et al.*'s (2005) ten-item scale. The Cronbach's α was 0.97.

Relative leader–member dyadic communication behavior. We measured group members' communication style in the Malaysian workplace using Bakar *et al.* 's (2014) 13-item Communication Styles in the Workplace Scale. A reliability analysis generated a Cronbach's α of 0.90. We followed Kozlowski and Klein's (2000) approach to obtain relative leader–member dyadic communication behavior. Thus, we subtracted the mean of leader–member dyadic communication behavior score within a group from each group member's composite leader–member dyadic communication behavior score. We are aware of the Edwards and Parry's (1993) critique of difference scores and the problem associated with difference scores between two perceptual variables. In the current study, this is not the case, because we subtracted the mean from each individual leader–member dyadic communication behavior score on a single variable, which is done to calculate relative leader–member dyadic communication behavior (Vidyarthi *et al.*, 2010).

Organizational identification. We measured group members' organizational identification via group leaders' rating using the six-item scale developed by Mael and Ashforth (1992). The Cronbach's α was 0.98.

Control variables. We also included individual demographic characteristics in the analysis because these variables may affect the relationships of interest (see Debus *et al.*, 2012). We added gender, tenure and education level as control variables. However, gender and education control variables were not significantly related to the dependent variable. Since we felt that including nonsignificant control variables would erode degrees of freedom (Becker *et al.*, 2016), we did not control these two variables for hypothesis testing. In this study, we controlled for the tenure variable, as it was significantly related to organizational identification.

Confirmatory factor analysis

We conducted two sets of confirmatory factor analysis: one for group member data and one for group leader data. This was done to assess the discriminant validity of all variables. For the variables rated by group members (i.e. ethical leadership and leader–member dyadic communication behavior), the CFA results (see Table I) suggested that the hypothesized two-factor model yielded a better fit (χ^2 (71, $N = 273$) = 463.12, $p < 0.01$, comparative fit index = 0.99, normed fit index = 0.97, standardized root-mean-square residual = 0.03 and root mean square error for approximation = 0.09) than did a one-factor model. Organizational identification rated by leaders also yielded one-factor model that demonstrated good fit according to standard measures (χ^2 (46, $N = 58$) = 380.10, $p < 0.01$, comparative fit index = 0.98, normed fit index = 0.96, standardized root-mean-square residual = 0.04 and root mean square error for approximation = 0.07). All items loaded significantly on their respective factors. This indicated clear discriminant validity for all variables, which enabled us to proceed with model testing (see Table II for factor loadings).

Data aggregation and level of analysis

Given that all of our analyses were cross level, we needed to establish that the variables at the individual level and at the group level could be aggregated. Also, we needed to determine whether it was necessary to control for group effects. In order to achieve this, we first calculated two forms of intra-class correlation coefficients (ICC). ICC (1) represented the proportion of variance attributable to group variability and ICC (2) reflected the extent to which groups were used to differentiate reliably in terms of the individuals' rating of the variables. As a next step, we drew upon research by Bliese (2000), who suggested that ICC (1) values close to 0.20 indicate that the scores are desirable for group-level analysis. Relatedly, values greater than 0.60 are desirable for ICC (2). Our ICC (1) and ICC (2) values calculated via ANOVA were 0.12 and 0.88 for ethical leadership–group member, 0.20, 0.18 and 0.77 for leader–member dyadic communication behavior and 0.19 and 0.85 for

Model	χ^2(df)	$\Delta\chi^2$(df)	CFI	NFI	SRMSR	RMSEA
Group member – variables[a]						
Two-factor	463.12 (71)	–	0.99	0.97	0.03	0.09
One-factor	187.73 (45)	258.74 (45)	0.35	0.48	0.30	0.20
Leader – variable[b]						
One-factor	380.10 (58)	–	0.98	0.96	0.04	0.07

Table I. Confirmatory factor analysis of the structure of the measured variables

Notes: df, degree of freedom; NFI, normed fit index; CFI, comparative fit index; SRMSR, standardized root-mean-square residual; RMSEA, root mean square error for approximation. [a]Variables include ethical leadership and leader–member dyadic communication behavior; [b]variable includes organizational identification. All χ^2 and $\Delta\chi^2$ values are significant at $p < 0.01$

Indicator	Factor loading
Ethical leadership – group members ($\alpha = 0.97$)	
My supervisor conducts his/her personal life in an ethical manner	0.87*
My supervisor defines success not just by results, but also the way that they are obtained	0.82*
My supervisor listens to what his/her employees have to say	0.78*
My supervisor disciplines his/her employees who violate ethical standards	0.73*
My supervisor makes fair and balanced decisions	0.70*
My supervisor can be trusted	0.70*
My supervisor discusses business ethics or values with his/her employees	0.83*
My supervisor sets an example of how to do things the right way in terms of ethics	
My supervisor has the best interests of his/her employees in mind	0.76*
When making decisions, my supervisor asks "what is the right thing to do?"	0.84*
Group member – communication style in Malaysian workplace ($\alpha = 0.90$)	
I try to interact nicely at work	0.78*
The interaction with my manager is good	0.88*
I am happy when interacting with my manager	0.76*
I like talking with a manager who uses polite language	0.90*
I am not keen on discussing private matters with my manager	0.80*
I interact with my manager as a "friend"	0.80*
I always try to solve relationship problems with my manager	0.85*
I always try to talk politely at work	0.86*
I can accept advice from my manager	0.85*
I provide comments to my manager	0.88*
I always project a character that is acceptable to my manager	0.81*
I always respect my manager's views	0.73*
I receive compliments from my manager	0.80*
Organizational identification ($\alpha = 0.98$)	
When someone criticizes this organization, this subordinate interprets it like a personal insult	0.86*
This subordinate is very interested in what others think about this organization	0.79*
When this subordinate talk about this organization, he/she usually says "we" rather than "me"	0.77*
This organization successes are this subordinate's successes	0.85*
When someone praises this organization, this subordinate interprets it like a personal compliment	0.66*
If a story in the media criticized this organization, this subordinate would feel embarrassed	0.62*

Note: *$p < 0.001$

Table II. Standardized factor loadings for the constructs

organizational identification. The results suggested that the individual-level variables could be aggregated, a cross-level analysis was appropriate and that hierarchical linear modeling techniques were necessary to test our hypotheses (see Tasa *et al.*, 2007).

Descriptive statistics

Table III presents descriptive statistics and correlations for all variables. Consistent with our predictions, ethical leadership was positively correlated to relative leader–member dyadic communication behavior and organizational identification. Furthermore, relative leader–member dyadic communication behavior was also correlated with organizational identification.

Hypothesis testing

Prior to hypothesis testing, we assessed the data for entry errors and normality (based on kurtosis and skewness) of the distribution on each item and the composite score for each variable. The majority of the items appeared within normal range. In addition, an inspection of

multicollinearity between predictors was also conducted based on the variance inflation factor (VIF) and tolerance index. The VIF and tolerance index are within the acceptable range for collinearity. We conducted hierarchical regression analyses by entering control variables, ethical leadership and the study variables into different steps of the equation. Table IV reports the regression results relating to *H1–H3*. The mediation analyses were based on procedures described in Kenny *et al.* (1998) and Mathieu and Taylor (2007) for testing meso–mediational relationships that go beyond Baron and Kenny's (1986) approaches of full mediation test, that is, at the first step, ethical leadership needs to be related to organizational identification. As shown in Table IV, ethical leadership was significantly and positively related to organizational identification ($\beta = 0.23$, $p < 0.05$), after controlling for individuals' perceptions of leader–member dyadic communication behavior, which was supported in our testing of *H1a*. The second step of this procedure requires ethical leadership to be significantly related to relative leader–member dyadic communication, which was supported in our testing of *H1b* ($\beta = 0.30$, $p < 0.01$) after controlling for individuals' perceptions of leader–member dyadic communication behavior.

Table III.
Means, standard deviations and correlation matrix

Variables	*M*	SD	1	2	3	4
1. Ethical leadership – group members	3.92	0.53	–			
2. Leader–member dyadic communication behavior	4.21	0.72	0.42*	–		
3. Relative leader–member dyadic communication behavior	0.0	0.69	0.44*	0.75*	–	
4. Organizational identification	5.04	0.62	0.36*	0.40*	0.43*	–

Notes: $n = 273$, n (leaders) $= 58$, $M =$ mean; Pearson's correlation coefficient, r. *$p < 0.05$

Table IV.
Results of hierarchical regression analysis for the hypothesized relationships

Independent variables	Mediator Relative leader–member dyadic communication behavior	Group members' outcome Step 4 Organizational identification
Step 1– controls		
Organizational tenure	0.17**	0.15**
Step 2 – control for leader–member dyadic communication behavior		
Group members' perceptions of leader–member dyadic communication behavior	0.40*	0.38*
Step 3 – main effect		
Ethical leadership – employees	0.30* (a)	0.23* (c)
Step 4 – mediating effect		
Ethical leadership – employees		0.20* (c′)
Relative leader–member dyadic communication		0.43* (b)
F	12.59**	10.85**
R^2	0.29**	0.28**
Adjusted R^2	0.26*	0.24**
ΔR^2 in the final step	0.23**	0.03*
Log-likelihood	26	28
Akaike (AIC)	280.30	285.31
Bayesian (BIC)	295.01	295.07
Intercept	1.63* (2.11)	1.03* (2.06)

Notes: Level 1, $n = 273$ group members; Level 2, $n = 58$ groups. *$p < 0.05$; **$p < 0.01$

In the third and fourth steps to test *H2* and *H3*, we included both ethical leadership and relative leader–member dyadic communication as predictors in the regression models. We found that relative leader–member dyadic communication was significantly related to organizational identification ($\beta = 0.43$, $p < 0.05$). It was also discovered that a significant indirect effect between ethical leadership and organizational identification was also observed in the predicted direction ($\beta = 0.20$, $p < 0.05$), but the regression weight had been reduced.

Based on Edwards and Lambert's (2007) recommendation, we used bootstrap confidence intervals to test our mediation hypotheses because they are bias-corrected ($\beta = 0.20$, $p < 0.05$). A one-tailed Sobel test also supported the significance of this indirect effect ($z = 5.43$, $p < 0.01$), as did bootstrap results, showing that a 95 percent bias-corrected confidence interval ($0.07 \leftrightarrow 0.26$) did not contain 0. Hence, *H2* and *H3* received support, as relative leader–member dyadic communication behavior not only had a direct impact on organizational identification, but also partially mediated the relationship between ethical leadership and organizational identification.

Discussion

In this study, we examined the effect of group members' relative standing of leader–member dyadic communication behavior. Specifically, we proposed a mediation model to examine the effect of relative leader–member dyadic communication behavior as an underlying process through which ethical leadership is associated with organizational identification. Our results support the hypothesized relationships in the model. Our key findings are twofold. First, we found that ethical leadership was positively related to relative leader–member dyadic communication behavior after controlling for individuals' perceptions of leader–member dyadic communication behavior. Second, we found that relative leader–member dyadic communication behavior within the workgroup was related to organizational identification, and also that leader–member dyadic communication behavior mediated the link between ethical leadership and organizational identification. Theoretical and pragmatic implications are presented below.

Theoretical implications

The present findings pave the way for future studies that might extend our current understanding of communication behavior within workgroups and its place in the leadership and communication literature in several ways.

First, we adopted the relational dyad communication model and SCT to underscore the importance of the actual degree to which an individual group member's leader–member dyadic communication behavior differs from the average leader–member dyadic communication behavior in the workgroup. Our findings suggest that ethical leadership has a positive relationship with relative leader–member dyadic communication. This study implied that a group member's perceptions of a group leader's ethical leadership style are likely to influence a member's relative standing in terms of his/her exchange of emotions, feelings, thoughts and manifestations of kindness with his/her group leader (Bakar and McCann, 2016). Thus, it is likely that when a group member perceived his/her group leader to be ethical, this group member is also more likely to engage more with the group leader compared to other group members. This, in turn, is likely to increase organizational identification among the members. As mentioned earlier, high relative leader–member dyadic communication behavior is associated with a positive self-concept for group members. This positive self-concept may influence how group members communicate to promote collective identity, emphasize a common experience and focus on shared interests. The implication of this is that the more group members feel validated and accepted by virtues of high relative leader–member dyadic communication behavior standings, the more they may feel motivated toward identifying with the organization.

Second, our findings shed new light on the communication process through which ethical leadership is related to work behavior (Boies *et al.*, 2015; Men, 2014). As noted by Hogg and Terry (2000), employees who enjoy a high level of organizational identification are likely to be motivated to define themselves based on group norms and values. In this case, the *budi bicara* norms and values are a manifestation of the socially and culturally appropriate interactive exchanges that occur between leaders and members within Malaysian workgroups. Therefore, group members tend to interpret group successes and failures as their own. In this study, we examined relative leader–member dyadic communication behavior as a mediator between ethical leadership and organizational identification. This suggests that the perceived group leader's ethical leadership style can also be construed in terms of group members' identification and as accommodating to the needs of individual and group enhancement. Relative leader–member dyadic communication behavior can therefore be seen as a form of social currency whereby group members might increase their organizational identification to workgroup efficiency and effectiveness.

This study provides crucial theoretical contributions to the literature regarding the relationship between ethical leadership and organizational identification via relative leader–member dyadic communication behavior. Our primary contribution lies in identifying the role of relative leader–member dyadic communication behavior in the relationship between ethical leadership congruence and organizational identification within the Malaysian organizational setting. This link further underscores the foundational role of communication in workgroups and organizations. We determined that ethical leadership influences relative leader–member dyadic communication behavior, which corresponds with the results of recent studies (see Avey *et al.*, 2012; Walumbwa *et al.*, 2017), and that relative leader–member dyadic communication behavior positively influences organizational identification.

From a communicative perspective (Bakar and Sheer, 2013; Omilion-Hodges and Baker, 2017), this suggests that in modeling ethical verbal and non-verbal behaviors, leaders are able to instill these prosocial behaviors within their workgroups. Furthermore, the social and task exchange elements via relative leader–member dyadic communication behavior within the workgroup generate organic opportunities for group members to engage in organizational identification behaviors. By using social comparison and SIT, leaders who demonstrate ethical behavior and encourage employees to actively express their opinions and concerns naturally create an environment of positive norms and values within the workgroup. In a work environment governed by ethical leadership, such as government link corporations in Malaysia, employees tend to compare with other group members when expressing their ideas and opinions (e.g. Bakar and McCann, 2016). Through this group mechanism, members demonstrated elevated levels of organizational identification.

Practical implications

The findings of our study also have practical implications. First, it appears that group members may be aware of their leader's ethical behavior and aware of their relative leader–member dyadic communication behavior standing as compared with other group members' relative leader–member dyadic communication behavior in the workgroup. This is because relative leader–member dyadic communication behavior standing represents an actual position of a group member in a set of differentiated leader–member relationships in the workgroup (see Bakar and Omilion-Hodges, 2018). Thus, managers may need to become more aware of how group members differentiate between high and low leader–member dyadic communication colleagues. Because communication differentiation plays a role in the social comparison process of leader–member relationships, it may also be associated with the relative leader–member dyadic communication behavior within the workgroup (Banks *et al.*, 2014). Indeed, results of the current investigation revealed a relationship between ethical leadership and organizational identification via communication differentiation.

Thus, managers from multinational corporations will benefit from the mediation model because they can identify specific communication characteristics of *budi* within the organization and develop a strategy to target employees' identification levels with the organization. For instance, a company may develop an internal communication program that reflects the norms of *budi bicara* characteristics of a country in which that company operates as a means to enhance leader–member communication and perhaps employee identification with the organization.

Limitations and suggestions for future research

The present study was subject to five limitations. First, the use of cross-sectional design makes it difficult to determine the direction of causality among the study variables; thus, cause–effect relationships should not be inferred from our findings. Although our results are consistent with the hypothesized relationships in the model, it is intuitively possible to develop alternative explanations for the relationship found in the model. Therefore, field experiments and longitudinal research designs might be needed to eliminate possible alternative explanations.

A second limitation concerns the potential for common method variance conflating relationships between variables because ethical leadership and leader–member dyadic communication behavior were measured from the same source (Podsakoff *et al.*, 2003). We adopted three strategies to minimize this effect, following recommendations by Podsakoff *et al.* (2003). First, our mediating variable, the relative leader–member dyadic communication behavior, was operationalized by subtracting the mean of leader–member dyadic communication behavior score within a workgroup from each workgroup member's composite leader–member dyadic communication behavior score (Vidyarthi *et al.*, 2010). Therefore, it is unlikely to prompt common method variance. Second, we collected data about organizational identification from group leaders. Third, our model involved testing a mediation relationship, which is actually less likely to be detected when relationships are artificially inflated (Edwards and Lambert, 2007). Based on this, we can say that common method variance did not improperly influence the hypothesized relationships in this study. However, as is the case with all novel research findings, future scholarship should attempt to replicate the current findings by collecting data at different points in time to increase confidence in the findings.

A third limitation relates to the potential non-respondent bias influencing the validity of our findings because the final sample of 58 group leaders and 272 group members was below 50 percent after excluding incomplete questionnaires and those failing to match with a group leader. Thus, this may be seen as a possible lack of generalizability.

A fourth potential limitation relates to how other variables may be related to group members' behavior. We believe, however, that it would be fruitful for future studies to examine the effects of ethical leadership on broader and more multi-dimensional communicative behavior such as LMX quality, cooperative communication or supervisory communication within group.

Fifth, we are aware that the way ethical behavior is defined differs from one culture to another. In the context of current study, ethical behavior is also related with the norms of *budi* where leaders are expected to communicate feelings and thoughts of virtue through politeness and kindness (see Bakar and McCann, 2016). Therefore, future research should explore cultural manifestations in defining what is perceived as ethical in a particular culture.

In sum, and despite the limitations outline above, we believe that our study contributes to the literature on leadership and communication in that we tested a mediation model whereby a group member's leader–member dyadic communication behavior relative to other group members' leader–member dyadic communication

behaviors is related to his/her individual work behavior. Our findings provide support for the model we hypothesized, thus confirming that group leader ethical leadership style influences organizational identification through relative leader–member dyadic communication behavior.

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